

“PREACHER, HELP US TO SEE” - VISUAL / IMAGINAL PREACHING

*“One of the most important things is to learn how to use images in preaching, how to appeal to imagery.... An attractive image makes the message seem familiar, close to home, practical and related to everyday life. A successful image can make people savor the message, awaken a desire and move the will towards the Gospel” (Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium* #157).*

We live in a digital, visual culture... one that appeals to the eyes... while preaching was born in an oral-aural culture... a culture that engaged the world around it and passed on what was important through speech more than sight. So how does an art, a way of communicating that has been shaped for centuries by its focus on the human voice get “heard” in a time and place that puts the emphasis on what we see (and is ready to “change channels” or click on another link the moment the images get boring) over what we hear... a culture in which really listening to one another is becoming a lost art?

One approach, adopted by some churches, has been to use projected images as part of their worship, including in their preaching. For most of us, that is not an option – and it brings along with it its own set of challenges and pitfalls. But one of the advantages that we do have as Catholics is that we have long used the visual arts in our liturgy and liturgical architecture: icons, stained glass windows, statues, vestments, and the like. As preachers, do we use these resources? When is the last time that you hear a preacher point out an object of liturgical art in the church itself and incorporate it into their homily (in an appropriate way)? Or, perhaps better: as a sacramental church we have a long history of appealing to the senses (all of them) in our worship. Can our preaching do the same?

In other words, more than the literal use of visual referents, the greater challenge to us as preachers is to preach in a way that people can “see” (and smell, touch, taste, hear) what we are talking about. According to Richard Eslinger, “[t]o preach in nonimagistic ways is in this postmodern context to lose the vernacular of our people” (Eslinger, *The Web of Preaching: New Options in Homiletic Method*, 280). The use of images in preaching—whether visual or linked to any of the other senses—is more than just rhetorical flourish; images are how we come to know; they mediate “between the self and the world” (Eslinger, 251). A homily in this mode of preaching might be structured as a series of images—either contemporary or historical/biblical—all reflective of a central theme or master image derived from the scriptures.

According to Richard A. Jensen, imaginal preaching can be structured using a four-fold approach. In the first part of the homily, the preacher explains the source of his (visual or verbal) image, which may come from the scriptures or from lived experience (Jensen, 137). If necessary, the second part of the homily connects the image to the scriptures which have been proclaimed (Jensen, 138). Next, the preacher shows how some part of human life is reflected in the image (Jensen, 138-139). Finally, the preacher moves to the good news, the promise of God, which correlates with the image/scriptures/lived experience (Jensen, 139-140).

Resources:

Crowley, Eileen D. *Liturgical Art for a Media Culture*. American Essays in Liturgy. Edward Foley, ed. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2007.

Jensen, Richard A. *Envisioning the Word: The Use of Visual Images in Preaching, with CD-ROM*. Fortress Resources for Preaching. Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2005.

Troeger, Thomas H. *Imagining a Sermon*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990.